Harnessing WhatsApp group communication for university teaching and learning during Covid-19 in Zimbabwe: Successes, challenges and prospects

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Abstract

The emergence of theCovid-19 global pandemic has thrown the education system into disarray in Zimbabwe and beyond as national lockdowns have been instituted in order to curb its spread. Face-to-face teaching was abandoned and institutions of higher learning were forced to adopt online options for teaching and learning purposes. The current study sought to establish the successes, challenges and prospects of using the WhatsApp platform for learning. The study adopted a case study research design. An open ended questionnaire and semi-structured interviews were used to gather data from fifteen final year university undergraduate students majoring in English Language and Literature and five lecturers in the school of education at a selected state university in Zimbabwe.A thematic approach was used to analyse the collected data.The study established that to a larger extent, the use of the WhatsApp group feature had facilitated teaching and learning during the national lockdown. Lecturers highlighted that they conducted lectures, sent notes, assignment questions and due dates to students on the class WhatsApp group. Students used the WhatsApp group feature to share reading material and engage in meaningful group discussions. The major challenge with using WhatsApp for teaching and learning was on the cost of WhatsApp bundles which were very expensive .Lecturers and students also indicated that there were some few students who flouted the purpose of the WhatsApp groups established for academic purposes by posting irrelevant material and jokes. The study recommends that universities provide the much-needed data bundles for learning to continue online despite the national lockdown. Lecturers and students in universities and colleges are encouraged to embrace WhatsApp group communication as it can facilitate the sharing of books and journal articles published online. Ground rules should also be respected to improve and formalise online learning.

Keywords: Communication, Covid-19, education, social media, WhatsApp, WhatsApp group chat

Introduction and background

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic (which is caused by coronavirus) and its declaration by the World Health Organisation as a global pandemic on 11 March 2020 (WHO, 2020) has seen many institutions of higher learning, including Zimbabwe, seeking alternative ways of

teaching since the normal face-to-face teaching had been abandoned because of the contagious nature of the disease. WHO (2020) urged countries to identify essential services to be prioritised. Countries were encouraged to comply with the highest standards of hygiene and to provide personal protective equipment to those providing essential services. In Zimbabwe, thePublic Health (Covid-19 Prevention, Containment and Treatment) Order as outlined in Statutory Instrument 83 of 2020 identified essential services that would be exempted from the national lockdown that began on 30 March 2020.Universities were not identified as an essential service; hence, they were instructed to close during the national lockdown. However, teaching and learning had to continue. There was therefore a need to find alternative ways of teaching.

Before the outbreak of the Covid-19 global pandemic, "online courses that incorporate mobile technologies [were] becoming a more frequent component in universities" (Inan, Flores & Grant, 2010 cited by Barhoumi, 2015: 221). Quite a number of online teaching platforms were used and continue to be used to facilitate online teaching and learning. These include Udemy, Blackboard Collaborate, Teachable, WizIQ, LearnCube, Vedamo, Google classroom and Thinkfic, among many others. These eLearning platforms allow instructors to create content using tools such as PDF documents and PowerPoint presentations. These platforms could be used as alternative ways of teaching during the national lockdown as they had proven to be successful even before the outbreak of Covid-19.

In addition to the aforementioned eLearning platforms, some scholars identified the WhatsApp platform (which has several features such as the text message, video and audio call, group chat and group call) as an effective eLearning platform. For example, Susanti and Tarmuji (2016) cite Mistar (2016) and Fatah (2015) showing that WhatsApp can be a useful teaching and learning platform. A study by Susanti and Tarmuji (2016) discussed techniques of optimising WhatsApp as an instructional tool for teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Indonesian senior high schools and they found out that the WhatsApp platform was a cheap and flexible means which could facilitate the learning of EFL. They noted that it was critical for the teachers to create a WhatsApp group before using the application for teaching and learning. They also noted that setting up rules was crucial if the use of the WhatsApp platform as a teaching and learning platform were to succeed. In a study conducted by Barhoumi (2015) it was established that the WhatsApp platform was a good tool for mobile learning when used in a blended course strategy. The WhatsApp platform can be handy in the

higher education enterprise especially for populations in developing countries with unreliable internet and power supply (Ngalomba, 2020).The current study therefore explores how lecturers and students at a selected state University in Zimbabwe have harnessed the WhatsApp group platform for teaching and learning Literature in English and language modules during the national lockdown.

Social media platforms by their nature are used to communicate various social issues among family members and other social groups. Subramanian (2017) observes that social media has shown significant growth as the preferred medium of communication, with Facebook and WhatsApp topping the list on the percentage of users. In a study carried out by Kumar and Sharma in 2016, it was found out that 94% of the participants were members of WhatsApp groups. Ngalomba (2020) suggests that the WhatsApp platform can be used as a teaching and learning tool despite being a social media platform. This paper endeavours to establish how final year English majors and their lecturers in a selected state university in Zimbabwe have harnessed WhatsApp for teaching and learning during the national lockdown given that research has shown that most students already use this platform for communication (Sharma &Kumar, 2016). Thepossible challenges faced by both lecturers and students in usingWhatsApp will also be established.

 Some scholars however argue that social media in general and WhatsApp in particular, negatively impact on university students' learning (examples include Mapako & Mareva, 2017; Subramanian, 2017 and Kumar &Sharma, 2016). In Subramanian's study, for example, the findings were that social media had negatively affected face-to-face interactions and that social media users had no control over the information they received especially those that used WhatsApp. Kumar and Sharma (2016) list several studies that were carried out on the impact of WhatsApp on students' performance. For example, they highlight findings of a study carried out in Ghana where WhatsApp was seen to be taking much of students' time and as affecting students' spellings and grammatical construction of sentences, among other negative impacts. Mapako and Mareva's (2017) study, found out that whilst social media was a vital channel for student participation on issues that affected them in their academic work, it also had a negative impact on their performance. For example, they found out that students imported social media language into their academic essays. As a result, according to Mapako and Mareva (2017) students used shorthand and clipped words such as 'nt', 'kp' in place of 'not' and 'keep', respectively, and this obviously compromised the quality of their academic

writing. These researches highlight the negative impact of WhatsApp on students' learning but have not looked at its use as a teaching and learning tool and this is the gap that the current study is going to fill.

In Zimbabwe, a national lockdown was announced on 30 March 2020 and all non-essential services were closed (Statutory Instrument 83 of 2020). Thus, university educators and students were forced to adopt online teaching and learning. At the selected state university, lecturers and students received a one day training on how to use Google Classroom for teaching and learning during the national lockdown. Arguably, the one day 'training' was not sufficient to enable lecturers and students to meaningfully use it, hence, this study sought to establish how university students and lecturers harnessed the most commonly used social media platform, WhatsApp, as it was readily at their disposal during the national lockdown. From the researcher's experience, students at the selected state university had already formed class WhatsApp groups which they used to communicate various issues (academic issues included) before the national lockdown, thus the current study explores how the WhatsApp platform impacted on teaching and learning during the national lockdown in Zimbabwe.

Statement of the problem

The emergence of Covid-19 as a global pandemic forced institutions of higher learning in Zimbabwe and beyond to abandon the usual physical face-to-face classes and adopt alternative remote teaching strategies, albeit at a very short notice. On the other hand, Subramanian (2017) notes that social media has shown significant growth as the preferred medium of communication, with Facebook and WhatsApp topping the list on the percentage of users. In addition, Kumar and Sharma (2016) found out that 94% of the participants in their study were members of WhatsApp groups. The main purpose of WhatsApp as social media platform is to communicate social issues such as achievements, future plans or personal problems among family members, workmates and friends. Before the national lockdown, students had already created WhatsApp class chat groups to communicate various issues among themselves. The current study sought to establish ways in which lecturers and undergraduate English majors took advantage of the WhatsApp group feature for teaching and learning since it was already a common means of communication among students. In addition, the study endeavoured to explore successes and challenges in its use as an eLearning platform and how it could be improved for access by the wider education community.

Research Questions

- How do university undergraduate students majoring in English and lecturers use WhatsApp group chats for academic purposes during the national lockdown?
- What challenges do the final year English majors and their lecturers face in the use of WhatsApp group communication for academic purposes?
- How can the teaching and learning mode be improved for positive results?

Literature Review

The outbreak of the Covid-19 global pandemic has affected the conventional ways of doing things in various sectorsworldwide, education included. As reported by Ngalomba (2020) the Covid-19 pandemic has led to the closure of schools and universities in one hundred and sixty-five (165) countries and this has affected more than 1.52 billion learners and nearly 60.2 million teachers worldwide. He further notes that a research in the United States revealed thata majority of students spent most of their time in a day on social media platforms, either for entertainment or news updates. As such, there is a possibility of harnessing digital technologies for educational purposes to ensure that school or university teaching and learning processes go ahead even in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, especially for populations in developing countries with unreliable internet and power supply (Ngalomba, 2020).

Online teaching and learning are not new phenomena as there are established open distance learning centres in countries like South Africa, Zimbabwe and Tanzania, among others (Musingafi, Mapuranga, Chiwanza and Zebron, 2015).Online teaching and learning, by their nature, use online platforms to reach out to their students who are scattered across different locations. This is not the case with some conventional institutions which relied mostly on physical face-to-face teaching before the outbreak of the Covid-19 global pandemic, hence the need for them to explore alternative ways of reaching out to students during the national lockdown. Ngalomba (2020) argues that the use of social media for academic purposes is not very common and it is his belief that universities can consider its exploitation, especially at a time when it is impossible to conduct the normal face-to-face tuition.

There are several advantages in adopting online teaching and learning in general and using WhatsApp as an online learning platform. In a research carried out by Gon and Rawekar (2017), the results showed that most of the students agreed that the WhatsApp platform was

easy to use and easily available and downloadable. In addition to that, WhatsApp users can check if messages have been received properly and read by the receiver when two blue tick marks appear next to the sent information (Ngalomba, 2020), meaning that both the student and the lecturer can easily check whether or not the sent message has been received. This means that the sender of the message can expect feedback once it has been read and cannot expect it if the blue ticks have not yet appeared. This means that the WhatsApp platform can offer a better communication platform than emails or short text messages (SMS) where it is difficult to tell if the message has been received and read by the receiver. This is why the current study proposes to harness WhatsApp for teaching and learning at university level.

Another advantage of adopting the WhatsApp social media platform as highlighted by Arteaga, Sánchez, Cortijo and Javed(2014) cited by Centinkaya (2017) is that it encourages collaborative learning which contributes to the learning process, active participation, learning anytime and anywhere, and informal communication. This means that teaching and learning are not restricted to the four walls of the classroom but can take place anytime and anywhere as long as one has access to the internet and in possession of a smartphone.

A study conducted by Gon and Rawekar (2017) noted that WhatsApp was useful in enhancing interaction between students, sharing learning material, accessibility to learning material and high interaction with the instructor. In addition to that, 70% of the participants in that study agreed that doubts were immediately cleared when WhatsApp was used as instructors clarified issues instantly. What this means is that, using WhatsApp can help not only teachers, but also students to facilitate the teaching and learning process even outside the classroom. Students can share learning materials and interact amongst themselves to solve challenges they might face in their endeavour to understand concepts in their areas of study. According to Robles, Guerrero, Humberto and Montero (2019) using WhatsApp turns out to be an inventive trend that results in better outcomes for both parties. Thus, the current study aims at establishing if lecturers and students at the selected state university have realised these benefits in their use of WhatsApp group communication for teaching and learning in the wake of Covid-19.

However, the use of WhatsApp for academic purposes has its downside as well. Among the challenges associated with the use of WhatsApp in the classroom is that WhatsApp groups limit the number of users, and this may prevent the formation of groups of students exceeding 256 (Ngalomba 2020). Also, Valentine (2002) cites McKnight (2000) as saying that

important factors in education such as proximity and eye contact are limited in the distance learning environment, yet these provide a meaningful connection between the students and their lecturers. As such, she notes that both are severely and sometimes permanently compromised. She adds that professors are unable to observe the emotions of the students and cannot detect 'moments of anxiety', thereby limiting their ability to respond to student needs (McKnight, 2000 cited in Valentine, 2002). This study endeavoured to establish if lecturers at the selected state university face similar or different challenges in their use of WhatsApp as a teaching and learning tool during the national lockdown and propose ways in which the challenges can be counteracted.

In addition to the above challenges, Valentine (2002) cites a survey of higher education administrators by Sherritt (1996) where it was found that higher education administrators and politicians understood the need for technology but, lacked the heart for distance education and could not bring themselves to support it with adequate personnel, simple supplies, and a reasonable operating budget. In a study by Gon and Rawekar (2017), 89.95% of the students disagreed that WhatsApp was free of charge as the college campus had no Wi-Fi connection and they had to take packages with mobile data which cost slightly more than the plan without mobile data. This means that successful online teaching and learning may be difficult to achieve if support is not offered, in this case, by university authorities. One way of showing support towards meaningful online teaching is to train instructors on how to use distance learning technology, but too often they are not supported (Valentine, 2002). This can hinder meaningful online teaching and learning. This study also sought to find out if the university had trained lecturers and students on the use of online teaching and learning platforms to ensure the successful execution of lectures during the national lockdown.

Despite the challenges highlighted above, Ngalomba (2020) contends that education systems need to constantly evolve to cope with the swift development of digital technologies. He believes that universities should have learnt from the unforeseen impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on education and must use the calamity as a reminder for them to have a contingency plan in place (Ngalomba, 2020) in case similar problems arise in the future. It is the intention of this study to establish how the WhatsApp group communication has been harnessed by lecturers and students as Plan B as the face-to-face teaching was abandoned after the outbreak of Covid-19. Successes, challenges and prospects of using WhatsApp for academic purposes are also explored in depth.

Methodology

The study adopted the qualitative approach which, according to Merriam (1998:8), is:

> …an approach which recognises that meaning emerges through interaction and is not standardised from person to person as in quantitative research, and thus allowing the researcher to study issues in detail, without predetermined categorised analysis. (Merriam, 1998:8)

This implies that qualitative research allows the emergence of meaning from research participants through interacting with them. In this study, the researcher interacted with final year students and lecturers to establish ways in which they have harnessed WhatsApp group communication for academic purposes.The qualitative research approach situates the observer in the world (Creswell, 2007).

The major intention of qualitative researchers is to enhance the understanding of a specific issue by "…bringing to life what goes on in the setting and how this is connected to broader panoply of real life" (Yin, 2005: xiv). In the same vein, Gray (2014) highlights that qualitative research is extremely contextual and the data is gathered in a natural and real life settings. Thus, the university setting enabled the researcher to study the phenomenon of harnessing WhatsApp group communication for teaching and learning during the national lockdown.

The case study research design guided this study. Yin (2009:12) defines a case study as "…an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context." Similarly, Rule and John (2011) point out that a case study is a deep and systematic investigation of a particular case to produce knowledge. Noting that the issue of the WhatsApp platform as a teaching and learning tool is contemporary, the researcher endeavoured to study it within a real-life context so that she could produce knowledge on how it could be embraced in education during the national lockdown.

Data collection was done through an open-ended questionnaire which was administered online on 15 purposively selected final year undergraduate students majoring in English. The open-ended questions were chosen to give room for participants to fully express themselves on the use of WhatsApp group communication for academic purposes during the national lockdown. The questionnaire allowed for anonymity, thus, reducing interviewer bias

(McBurney & White, 2010). Interviews were administered on five purposively selected lecturers in the School of Education who were already using the platform to teach the students. The researcher was not amongst the students' lecturers so the results discussed below do not reflect her own practice. Since the study was conducted during the lockdown, the researcher interviewed the five lecturers through WhatsApp call. Interviews were used because they allowed the researcher to solicit for more information through further probing.

Findings

Findings from the questionnaire

The findings from the questionnaire are presented according to themes that emerged from the responses given by the student participants. In the presentation of findings, the names attached to the students' and lecturers' responses are pseudonyms used to protect their identities. Overall, it was established that the WhatsApp platform was commonly used among students and hence, it could be easily exploited as a teaching and learning tool during the national lockdown. The subsequent section explores the issue in greater detail.

WhatsApp platform as a means to communicate academic issues

The researcher intended to find out how the participants used WhatsApp to communicate academic issues and which features of the platform were commonly used. It emerged that the participants used the group chats more to communicate academic issues compared to other features on WhatsApp such as the voice call or the video call. Below are some of the responses given:

We created a class group chat platform for all the English majors before lockdown and it is very easy for us to share reading materials and even ideas on how to tackle an assignment. During lockdown, our lecturers created groups for the different modules that we do and they send notes, assignment questions and reading materials on those groups – Laura

We created a group to communicate academic issues only and the group is very helpful. We receive relevant information and material from colleagues to help us in answering assignment questions and even to prepare for examinations-Jane

I enjoy being a member of the class WhatsApp groups because that is where we receive educational material for our African Literature and Women in Literature modules. Our lecturers send relevant reading materials, notes and even module outlines on WhatsApp-John

Assignment questions for our English modules are discussed on the group chat and by the time I write my assignment I will be enlightened-Mazvita

We are of different academic abilities and the WhatsApp group chat has worked well over the years to help those that have challenges academically. We help each other understand the demands of the question. As a result, most of us perform well in our African Literature and Women in Literature assignments. Thanks to WhatsApp for the group feature- Tendai.

In our group there are two guys who have access to Wi-Fi at home. They are the ones who download relevant books and journal articles for our English modules from the internet. They are very generous with information because they post whatever material they would have downloaded on our WhatsApp group chat for everybody to see. I am indebted to these two for the great job they are doing- Peter

Given the current situation of a national lockdown, we cannot go to the library to read hard copy books. Online books and commentaries for the set-books we do in African and Women in Literature modules are constantly updated and when I download them, I make sure that I share with my colleagues. To ensure that everyone benefits, I post the material on the WhatsApp group chat-James.

The responses above reveal that the participants have harnessed the WhatsApp chat groups to communicate academic issues and it has been very helpful to them during the Covid-19 lockdown. Through the WhatsApp group feature, they shared ideas on how to tackle assignment questions and prepare for examinations. The WhatsApp group chat was a useful tool in communicating academic knowledge and it had been used by the participants to scaffold those with academic challenges. As a result, participants like Tendai felt that the use of the WhatsApp class chat group had contributed to their performance in assignments.

Another interesting observation from the responses above is that even though social media platforms, as the name suggests, are meant to communicate social issues, university students have gone beyond communicating social issues, among others, by using the WhatsApp group chat to communicate academic issues. They have found it more useful even during the national lockdown because lecturers have used the platform to send notes and other materials that facilitate their understanding of concepts from the different modules they do. Useful academic materials are shared among group members for the benefit of all. As James indicates in his response above, English Language and Literature materials shared from the internet are up-to-date which makes it more advantageous to read books downloaded from the internet compared to reading some of the hard copies in the library. The WhatsApp group has thus helped in ensuring that teaching and learning continue at the selected state university despite the Covid-19 induced lockdown.

From the questionnaire, it emerged that the availability of Wi-Fi was indispensable if students were to upload and download reading materials on the WhatsApp group chat. Some of the responses given were:

I don't have any problems in uploading literature reading materials for my colleagues on the group chat because we have unlimitedWi-Fi at home-James
Many articles and even books for our English modules are sent on the class WhatsApp group but downloading them is difficult if one is not on Wi-Fi-Lyn

We receive lots of reading materials on the group chat from lecturers and colleagues and it's easy to download the material using homeWi-Fi. Of course we don't send equally, most of us benefit from the generosity of those with the knowledge of downloading authentic material for our English main subject modules from the internet. Most of us are not aware of how to get these books and articles from the internet-John

The group members share books on the group chat. We have received commentaries on the set-books we study in our main subject and even analysis of poems on the WhatsApp group chat. Learning has been made easy through the internet and WhatsApp group chat and this has seen a marked improvement in our performance in assignments-Lotricia

> *I cannot afford the data to download all those books and notes sent on the group. Despite the abundance of material posted by our generous friends and lecturers on the class WhatsApp group, access to such material remains a nightmare if one doesn't have the WhatsApp bundles- Fay.*

The responses above are an indication that WhatsApp can be meaningfully used for teaching and learning at university if students have access to the internet. Those with home Wi-Fi found it easy to share academic materials and it was cheaper compared to the cost of WhatsApp bundles (See Fay's response above). This has benefitted those who rely on their colleagues for authentic reading material like the student respondent who admitted that he did not know how to download authentic material from the internet. However, the responses also show that without Wi-Fi it was difficult for group members to download the sent materials. From one of the responses above, it is clear that useful material like commentaries and poetry analyses are sent on the WhatsApp group chat and this facilitates understanding of novels and poetry anthologies they study in their English main subject. This confirms that university students and lecturers have harnessed WhatsApp as a tool for teaching and learning and this has ensured that learning continues even though there is a lockdown. Participants have embraced social media in general and WhatsApp groups to enhance their educational knowledge through sharing authentic reading material downloaded from the internet.

Another question on the questionnaire required the participants to highlight why they preferred using the WhatsApp group feature for academic purposes. Below are some of the responses:

> *Everyone is on WhatsApp and it was easy for the group admins to incorporate all members of the class into the group. As such, learning continued even though we are locked down at home- Tendai.*
> *You can easily see who has read your message and you can request those who would have read your message to respond. However, in most cases feedback is instant, which makes WhatsApp a better platform than other platforms that do not allow for instant feedback- Lorraine.*
>
> *Messages sent will still be delivered even if they were sent when one was out of WhatsApp bundles. So you can catch up with others on issues discussed when you were offline- Laura.*

WhatsApp allows you to see who is typing a message and if it is your lecturer typing you cannot afford to go offline because lecturers only post information that is relevant for the module- James.

We received 'training' on google classroom a day before we closed school but honestly, we did not fully grasp how this platform should be used. Both lecturers and students needed more time to familiarise themselves with it before trying to implement it as a mode for online teaching and learning. So we agreed with all our lecturers to use WhatsApp for our class discussions during this lockdown- Peter.

WhatsApp was the only option accessible because its bundles are cheaper compared to those that are required for one to use google classroom or email which university encouraged us to use when we went on lockdown- Melbourne.

We never knew that it is possible to learn all the content on the module outline through WhatsApp. I have come to the realisation that Covid-19 has challenged us to think outside the box and use what we have at our disposal for learning to continue- Mary.

The responses above raise pertinent issues on why lecturers and students at the selected state university have embraced WhatsApp for teaching and learning. The issues of instant feedbackin WhatsApp communication, lack of know-how on using Google Classroom and being accessible to all members of the class were some of the reasons why WhatsApp was preferred ahead of other options available such as Google Classroom and use of emails. It emerged that data bundles for emails and Google Classroom were much more expensive compared to the WhatsApp data bundles. It is also interesting to note that participants felt that the emergence of Covid-19 as a global pandemic challenged university lecturers and students to devise survival strategies in as far as teaching and learning was concerned. It had challenged them to explore possibilities of using technological gadgets and applications at their disposal to proceed with teaching and learning even during the national lockdown.

Challenges encountered in the use of WhatsApp groups for academic purposes

Despite the fact that participants acknowledged the utility of WhatsApp groups for academic purposes, they also highlighted some challenges that came along with it. Below are excerpts from the students' responses:

Data is very expensive and most of us cannot afford it- Tendai

The biggest challenge we have is that some members post social material for a group that was created solely for academic purposes. It's so disappointing given the price of data bundles-Laura

We are expected to learn through WhatsApp but the school has not provided us with data to facilitate this. As a result, some students go for days without going on WhatsApp and they lose out on class discussions. To make matters worse, some group members are in the habit of sending political videos which I think is unfair because it wastes other people's data which is so expensive. After all, the group was created for the teaching and learning of specific module in our English main subject.- Peter

People abuse the group chat that we created with the aim of communicating school issues. You find somebody posting those religious chain messages on the group yet the group is not a religious one- Mary

We have a problem with some members who use the platform to communicate their political agendas. It is very unfortunate-James

I hate irrelevant posts on the class group chat. The group is meant for academic purposes only but some members choose to send irrelevant material on the platform- Darryl.

A day does not pass without one or two going offside. Political issues and sometimes pornographic materials are sent willingly on the platform. It's so disgusting- Melbourne.

The responses above show that the cost of data is unbearable to most of the students. The situation is exacerbated by the fact that some WhatsApp platform group users tend to abuse their privilege of being in the group to communicate issues that are irrelevant to the purpose of the group. This wastes their colleagues' WhatsApp data bundles which are very expensive (See Laura and Peter's responses above). Among the irrelevant posts highlighted by the participants are religious, political and even pornographic materials. Participants' responses above show that they do not like it when such irrelevant posts are posted on a group that is meant to communicate academic issues. It is unfortunate that

daily such irrelevant posts are sent on the educational group chat (see Melbourne's response above). This would eat up time which should have been used for research and other academic endeavours.

The researcher also asked the participants to highlight measures that could be put in place to ensure that members fully benefit from WhatsApp group chats created for academic purposes. Below are some of the suggestions:

The group admin should clearly outline the group description so that it is clear to members what should be communicated on the group. In the case of our group, the description does not clearly outline the purpose of the group. Maybe that is why some members are at liberty to post anything on the group-Darryl

Anyone who sends irrelevant posts should be chucked out of the group. We are in other groups and the moment you send anything unrelated to the purpose of the group you are removed. Other members would learn that nonsense is not tolerated- John. Remove unruly elements, period!- Laura

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Ground rules should be set from the onset. Members should be made aware of the consequences of breaking the group rules from the onset. That way we can reduce or even eliminate irrelevant posts in a group that should communicate school issues only- Tendai.

All members should be treated equally. Sometimes you find people showing tolerance on irrelevant posts by certain members, yet others are strongly reprimanded if they do the same. There should be no sacred cows in the group so wrong things should be condemned irrespective of who has done it. This is the only way we can ensure the success of these WhatsApp groups that we have created to communicate academic issues- James.

Responses above show that there is a possibility to improve the use of WhatsApp for teaching and learning. As Tendai suggests, members should be aware of the consequences of breaking group rules. From James' response, there should be an equal treatment of members to ensure that all abide by the set rules.

Results from lecturers' interviews

The interviews with lecturers showed that the WhatsApp platform had been adopted as the alternative to face-to-face teaching during the national lockdown. This can be noted from the following responses:

Our training on google classroom was not thorough so personally, I never attempted to use it. With all my students on WhatsApp, it was handy for us to use it for our class discussions in the African Literature module that I teach- Mr Peters.

WhatsApp has the advantage that you can create or join a group and send notes and other reading materials once rather than sending to individual students. It has proven to be a user-friendly platform for both the student and the lecturer- Mrs Rommel.

In concurrence were Mr Jones and Mrs Williams who both indicated that they had joined their students' WhatsApp groups and they had managed to send module outlines, teaching notes, journal articles relevant to the module content and assignment questions.

Mr Dennis had this to say:

I am using the WhatsApp group chat with my classes because we agreed that it was the best option in our situation. I am confident that we will be able to cover our syllabus before the onset of the exams.

These responses show that all the five lecturers had embraced WhatsApp group communication as a measure to deal with the Covid-19 induced lockdown. As indicated by Mr Peters, training on Google Classroom was not thorough so he never attempted to use it. WhatsApp had been adopted and learning had continued even without face-to-face interaction with the students. Mrs Rommel found WhatsApp to be user friendly as information for the whole class could be sent once on the WhatsApp group.

Lecturers also indicated that there were challenges associated with using WhatsApp for teaching and learning. Below are some of their responses:

We are in a quandary because the WhatsApp data bundles are beyond the reach of many students and even us as lecturers. That weekly bundle expires within a day and juicing WhatsApp bundles at this rate is unsustainable- Mrs Williams.

Some of our English major students do not have money to purchase WhatsApp bundles and as a result, only a few students are active during class discussions. We

also have a problem of students who send irrelevant posts on the class WhatsApp group- Mr Dennis.

My problem with being in the same WhatsApp group with students is that they tend to post material that is irrelevant and unsuitable for a group that should strictly focus on Women in Literature- Mrs Rommel.

Mr Jones and Mr Peters concurred with Mrs Rommel when he indicated that students had a tendency of posting irrelevant information on the academic group and that diverted the attention of members to an extent that at times members would spend the whole afternoon arguing who could be a better leader of the country after a political post would have been posted. The cost of WhatsApp bundles had also affected both lecturers and students as indicated in Mrs Williams and Mr Dennis' responses above.

The researcher also asked the lecturer participants to offer solutions to the challenges they faced in using the WhatsApp group chat feature as a teaching and learning tool and below are their responses:

Group admins should be stricter on rule breakers. This could minimise irrelevant posts- Mrs Rommel.

The money that the university used to purchase Wi-Fi should now be used to purchase data bundles for both lecturers and students since we are all locked in our homes. Of what use is the Wi-Fi on campus when we are not even allowed to set foot there?-Mr Dennis.

Lecturers and class reps should be the group admins. When it is not time for class discussions, the group admins can change group settings so that only admins can be allowed to post on the group chat. The settings can only be changed to allow other class members to post during class discussions. This way we can minimise irrelevant post by some students- Mr Jones.

The institution should ensure the success of online teaching by purchasing data bundles for both the lecturers and students- Mrs Williams.

If students are told that posting irrelevant materials on the class WhatsApp group is a punishable offence, they will not do it. We tend to be too lenient sometimes and this affects the smooth flow of teaching and learning using WhatsApp- Mr Peters

Discussion

The findings from both the student and lecturer participants show that there had been successes in the use of WhatsApp as a distance learning platform. All the fifteen student participants and five lecturers agreed that WhatsApp was the most common social media platform and as such, they had meaningfully used it for the teaching and learning of English during the national lockdown. The WhatsApp group feature had enabled students to share educational materials for their English main subject modules amongst themselves. They also discussed assignment questions on their class WhatsApp group and this significantly improved their performance in assignments. Lecturers also managed to send module outlines, notes and other relevant reading materials on the WhatsApp group platform. Therefore, it can be observed that WhatsApp groups have enabled final year English undergraduate majors to learn despite the fact that face-to-face teaching had been stopped due to the outbreak of Covid-19. These findings confirm the observation that although the student and teacher are separated by space in distance education, they are not necessarily separated by time (Valentine, 2002) as they have successfully harnessed WhatsApp as a tool for teaching and learning during the national lockdown.

The findings of this study agree with a study carried out by Gon and Rawekar (2017) that most of the students agreed that WhatsApp was simple to use and easily available and downloadable. Arteaga, Sánchez, Cortijo and Javed (2014) cited by Cetinkaya (2017) note that it encourages collaborative learning which contributes to the learning process, active participation, learning anytime and anywhere, and informal communication. The findings of this study have shown that students enjoyed being part of the group and also enjoyed benefits such as instant feedback from their English Language lecturers. This is consistent with Gon and Rawekar's (2017) findings where 70% of the participants in that study agreed that doubts were immediately cleared when WhatsApp was used because instructors clarified issues instantly. This is an indication that, as Ngalomba (2020) suggests,WhatsApp can provide a new impetus for digital education in Africa hence, the need to explore ways in which it can be used for teaching and learning.

The findings have also shown that WhatsApp was regarded as the only option for learning to continue during the national lockdown because both lecturers and students seemed to have inadequate knowledge on using google classrooms which was the other option proposed by the university. They acknowledged that that they had been trained but the time was too short for them to fully grasp ways in which they could use the Google

Classroom platform during the lockdown. What was left at their disposal was the WhatsApp platform and they exploited its group feature to create classes which enabled learning to continue despite the fact that students were scattered in different locations after the closure of schools by government in its endeavour to curb the spread of Covid-19. Collaborative learning and sharing of learning material was possible with the use of WhatsApp. This means that WhatsApp does not only impact negatively on students' learning (as noted in Subramanian, 2017 and Kumar & Sharma, 2016) because the findings of this study show that the group chat was handy in sharing academic material. Lecturers and students managed to engage in meaningful class discussions and they had made significant progress towards the completion of syllabuses.

Although the English Language and Literature lecturers and their final year students at the selected university had harnessed WhatsApp for teaching and learning there were challenges associated with its use. The cost of WhatsApp data bundles was highlighted as one of the challenges that hindered a smooth flow of teaching and learning. Both the lecturers and students had challenges in purchasing WhatsApp data bundles. This seems to suggest that the university had not provided data for both students and lecturers. As the findings show, only a few students actively participated in one lecturer's class because the majority of them did not always afford to buy the required bundles. These findings show that WhatsApp cannot be considered as a cheap means of communication where there is no Wi-Fi connection. In Gon and Rawekar's (2017) study, 89.95% students disagreed that WhatsApp was free of charge as the college campus had no Wi-Fi connection and they had to take packages with mobile data which cost slightly more than the plan without mobile data. Data bundle costs, according to the findings of this study, hindered the active participation of students during class discussions.

Findings also indicate WhatsApp group communication presents a challenge to lecturers when they are part of a group with students. Lecturers had a challenge with students who posted irrelevant material on the class WhatsApp groups that were created to facilitate the teaching and learning of specific modules for English majors . As a result, that diverted the attention of other students and also wasted their WhatsApp bundles that both parties agreed were very expensive. Some students also complained that there were some among them who did not respect the purpose of the group by posting church chain messages,

political and, in extreme cases, pornographic material. This shows that sometimes it is difficult to control individuals in the use of WhatsApp groups as some will still post irrelevant material, maybe because they do not take WhatsApp seriously since it is a social media platform anyway.

The fact that students get carried away and send irrelevant posts on the class WhatsApp group agrees to some extent with the findings of a study byChiridza et al. (2016)on social media and the society where it was established that university students shared very little academic content through WhatsApp. As indicated in their study, the majority of the research participants shared hoaxes, pornographic videos, X-rated files and self-nude pictures among others. For this study, however, the bulk of the shared material such as module outlines, course notes and set-book commentaries among others, was relevant and the WhatsApp groups had facilitated teaching and learning but as one student participant's response indicates, there were some among them who would go 'off-side' and post unacceptable material. These findings agree with Ngalomba's(2020) view that universities can consider the exploitation of WhatsApp for academic purposes especially at a time when it is impossible to conduct the normal face-to-face classes due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Solutions to the problems were suggested to improve the prospects of improving the use of WhatsApp for teaching and learning. The participants' responses show that they are aware of the practices that hinder effective academic communication using WhatsApp group platforms. From the responses it is clear that group administrators were not strict on disruptive elements and that is why some amongst group members continued to send irrelevant posts. That may explain why one of the participants ordered the removal of unruly elements from the group. The issue of setting ground rules as suggested by another participant is quite meaningful as rules would control the behaviour of members so that they stick to the group purpose. If the suggestions given above are followed, WhatsApp group communication for academic purposes could be very successful as indicated in James' response. This makes Ngalomba's (2020) observation valuable as he encourages the need for the education system to constantly evolve to cope with the swift development of digital technologies.

Overall, findings of this study confirmed Ngalomba's (2020) argument that there is a possibility of harnessing digital technologies to ensure that school or university teaching and learning processes go ahead in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, especially for populations in developing countries with unreliable internet and power supply. WhatsApp and its group feature enabled lecturers and students at the selected state university to proceed with teaching and learning even under lockdown. This was despite the challenges they encountered on its use. One of the lecturer participants hoped to finish the syllabus using the WhatsApp group chats before the onset of the examinations. If this succeeded, then WhatsApp can be recommended as a contingent plan in times of crisis where it is impossible to conduct face-to-face classes.

Conclusion and recommendations

The discussion above has indicated that lecturers and students at the School of Education at the selected state university use WhatsApp group chats to communicate academic issues. Assignment questions are discussed on the WhatsApp groups that were created for academic purposes and this has seen a marked improvement on students' course marks. WhatsApp groups have also facilitated the sharing of module outlines, notes and authentic materials downloaded from the internet. It can, therefore be concluded that, WhatsApp group communication has gone beyond the purpose of communicating social issues to become a channel through which academic knowledge can be communicated by university lecturers and students, especially during the Covid-19 crisis.

The following recommendations can thus be made:

- English Language and Literature lecturers and students should embrace the WhatsApp group feature during the national lockdown as it facilitates meaningful teaching and learning to occur.
- Universities should provide data to both lecturers and students to ensure that teaching and learning go on in abnormal situations like national lockdowns.
- Lecturers and students who have not yet embraced WhatsApp for teaching and learning are encouraged to create and use WhatsApp group chats to share academic information. This would ensure enhancement of students' assignment and examination writing skills.
- Lecturers should provide guidance to students on material that is authentic as there is a possibility that students can share specious material.

- Group administrators should be the regulators of discipline among group members so that groups are used for the purposes they are created. In the same vein, group descriptions should clearly articulate the group purpose so that the groups created for academic communication remain as such without diverting attention to other non-academic issues.

- Students should embrace social media platforms such as the WhatsApp group chat to communicate educational knowledge as these platforms are a fast and cheap means of communication.

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